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TAGS: PREL LE SY EG KISL UNSC FR

SUBJECT: (C) FRENCH MFA ON POLITICAL CONSULTATIONS WITH  
EGYPT: SYRIA STABILITY, UN ISSUES, CARTOONS

REF: PARIS 1700

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Josiah Rosenblatt, reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) On the margins of a March 15 discussion on human rights in Syria (reftel), MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant Herve Besancenot commented briefly on March 8-9 political consultations in Cairo between France and Egypt, for which the French delegation was led by MFA Political Director Stanislas de Laboulaye. (Laboulaye was accompanied by Besancenot, MFA A/S-equivalent for NEA Jean-Francois Thibault, and MFA A/S-equivalent for International Organizations/UN Sylvie Bermann.) Besancenot reported that the discussions topics included Israeli/Palestinian issues, Syria/Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Africa, UN issues, and the prophet Mohammed cartoon controversy.

¶2. (C) Besancenot reported that he was most struck by a private conversation on Syria which he had with an unnamed senior MFA cabinet official whom he described as influential and close to President Mubarak. According to Besancenot, the Egyptian MFA official described the relationship between President Mubarak and Bashar al-Assad as "broken," with the Egyptian president viewing the Assad family as "finished" in Syria. That said, the Egyptian MFA official described Mubarak as very worried by the prospect of another destabilization in the region after Iraq, and not seeing a democratic alternative to the Syrian regime. What Mubarak was waiting for, according to Besancenot's contact, was a "palace coup" from within the Ba'ath party or Syrian army, with "another strongman" taking over the country. The general idea would be a change in leadership at the top, removing the Assad family grip on power, without dismantling the Ba'th party system. Besancenot cautioned that he did not interpret his Cairo discussion to suggest that Egypt would undermine the SARG; he concluded that the GOE would do "nothing to help" and "nothing to destroy" the Assad regime. Besancenot also commented that the Egyptian government lacked an emotional attachment to the late Rafik Hariri, in contrast to Saudi Arabia; his Egyptian MFA contact questioned the international outcry over Hariri's assassination, noting that it was not the first time an Arab politician had been murdered.

¶3. (C) Besancenot suggested that the remaining GOF-GOE discussions covered familiar ground, with both sides sticking to established positions on most issues. One of the few points of divergence was over French reluctance to endorse Egypt's quest for a UNSC permanent seat, with the Egyptian MFA IO Director offering a "Brezhnevian" defense of Egypt's case. Besancenot commented that the GoF viewed Egypt as lacking critical support within the UN Africa regional group, and overestimating its popularity within the General Assembly as a launching pad to a permanent seat.

¶4. (C) On the cartoon controversy, Besancenot noted that Assistant Foreign Minister Wafa Basim told Laboulaye that the crisis was not a passing "summer cloud," and had shown the serious divergence between Europe's largely irreligious culture and the Muslim world. Basim commented that even she -- as a modern, moderate Muslim well-acquainted with the West -- could not understand why European newspapers had sought to strike at the heart of Muslim beliefs. Basim floated the idea of forming an informal "crisis cell" to address possible future eruptions, an idea politely dismissed by the French side as too bureaucratic.

¶5. (C) Comment: We defer to Embassy Cairo on the accuracy of Besancenot's assessment of the Egyptian position on Syria. Besancenot, a former DCM at the French Embassy in Cairo, has exhibited considerable sympathy for GOE positions, in addition to claiming privileged access to Egyptian officials.

End comment.

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Stapleton